American Indian Sainthood and the Catholic Church

Michael F. Steltenkamp, S.J.

Recent decades have witnessed Indian participation diminish within Christian churches. This trend underscores the importance of Kateri Tekakwitha's canonization on October 21, 2012. It was a long overdue acknowledgement of the sanctity that is just as evident within Native North American populations as it is among others. With Indian America now having a woman saint, a male counterpart ought to be close behind her. Nicholas Black Elk is the pre-eminent candidate for this honor. Probably better known than Kateri, Black Elk's popular "life story" was published in 1932, and reprinted many times in at least eleven languages. However, it was not known until the end of the twentieth century that most of the man's life had gone unreported. Unknown to readers was that Black Elk had been a devout Catholic catechist for close to fifty years. It was this role for which his people held him in high esteem (400 of them baptized because of his missionary labors). In the event Black Elk is canonized, the church can be indicted for doing too little too late. Had it acted more quickly, the church might have provided balance to an Indian cultural resurgence that included heavy doses of anti-Christian rhetoric that encouraged many to forsake affiliation with faith communities.

Italian saints are so numerous that a different individual could be honored each day of the year. By contrast, not one American Indian has been elevated to sainthood – despite 500 years of contact with Christianity. At least, this was the case until October 21, 2012. That was the special date on which the disproportionate ratio was altered, and on which Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680) became the first American Indian canonized a saint of the Roman Catholic Church.¹

Born near present day Auriesville, New York, Kateri practiced the faith with a piety that impressed both the Jesuit priests who were her

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¹ Etymologically, "Kateri" is thought to be what an English-speaking American heard when a francophone pronounced the name "Catherine." It is not a traditional name within the Mohawk language. The meaning of Tekakwitha has been debated. The variants are: "She who approaches with small steps," "She who puts everything in order," and "she who bumps into things."

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1. Etymologically, "Kateri" is thought to be what an English-speaking American heard when a francophone pronounced the name "Catherine." It is not a traditional name within the Mohawk language. The meaning of Tekakwitha has been debated. The variants are: "She who approaches with small steps," "She who puts everything in order," and "she who bumps into things."
pastors, and her people, the Mohawk (one of six Indian nations that composed the "League of the Iroquois"). When Kateri died on April 17, 1680, Jesuit Fathers Claude Chauchetiere and Pierre Cholenc noticed that her smallpox-marked complexion became creamy smooth. Chauchetiere and others even claimed to see apparitions of Kateri shortly after her passing. When a chapel was built at her grave, it became a pilgrimage destination (and remains so to this day).

In the mid-twentieth century, the "Tekakwitha Conference" was organized by Catholic priests who worked on reservations in the northern plains. Today, it is largely a lay organization that coordinates the many "Kateri Prayer Circles" that exist within reservation and urban Indian communities. Indian and non-Indian circle members perform charitable deeds, and support one another in spirit and prayer (in the tradition of Kateri herself).

The Jesuits instructed Kateri to "see God in all things," but the Catholic Church's canonization process requires an extraordinary manifestation of the supernatural associated with the candidate. This manifestation, generically referred to as a "miracle," is part of a process that usually consists of four stages. The first of these occurs when one's cause is initiated (Kateri's was begun in 1884). If evidence supports the claim, the person is declared "Venerable" (which took place in 1943). This paved the way for her to be named "Blessed" in 1980 (a designation that requires a miracle). Sainthood could follow if a second miracle took place.

Over the years, many people prayed for Tekakwitha's canonization, and the necessary miracle came about in 2006. It seemed all the more providential because the recipient of the intervention was Jake Finkbonner, a five-year old Indian boy and member of the Lummi tribe from Ferndale, Washington. He suffered from necrotizing fasciitis, a flesh-eating bacterium that can often be fatal. Just as smallpox scarred Blessed Kateri's face, so this pathology was scarring young Jake's.

Doctors told his parents that they had done everything they could to cure the condition, and that they did not know if Jake would survive (he was in an induced coma). After having a parish priest anoint their son, the parents learned of Blessed Kateri's story and contacted Sister Kateri Mitchell (Executive Director of the Tekakwitha Conference and who is herself a Mohawk). They asked if

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2. The other nations within the League were the Onondaga, Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, and Tuscarora.

3. Her bones are in a sealed marble tomb at the St. Francis Xavier Church in Kahnawake, Quebec.
she might come to Washington and pray over Jake with a relic of Blessed Kateri.

Strangely enough, Sister Kateri had already planned to visit the area in another week in order to prepare for the upcoming national Tekakwitha meeting that coincidentally had been scheduled for the Lummi reservation. She prayed over Jake, and his mother pinned the relic to his pillow. In the days that followed, doctors were surprised to see the condition begin to clear. Now conscious, the little boy reported that he had a wonderful meeting with God. God said that Jake had a mission to accomplish in life, and so returned him to his family.

A Relic of Kateri

Father Henri Bechard was for many years the Canadian "Vice-Postulator" for Tekakwitha. His task was to gather information that might lead to her canonization (a role once known as that of the "devil's advocate"). He attended the annual Tekakwitha Conference one summer and met with American Jesuits who worked within the Indian world. It was at this conference that I met Bechard.

In the course of conversation, I asked if he might give me a relic of Kateri to use in my work with Indian people ("first class" relics are usually a tiny piece of bone from a "saint" – contained in a round metallic "reliquary" within a plastic box that is 1⅜ by 1⅜ inches).

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4. This series of events has moved people to echo Albert Einstein's comment that "coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous."
Written in Latin, a Vatican document accompanies the relic (attesting to its authenticity).

Bechard was a kind elder who appreciated my stab at speaking French with him. Our encounter was a congenial one, but he said that he only had a limited number of Kateri relics. He needed them for churches that would one day want them should she be canonized. I told him that I understood, and let the matter drop.

When I resumed teaching that year, I thought of Bechard from time to time, and decided to write him. Expressing gratitude for our pleasant visit the previous summer, I gave it one more try and said: "I hope you might reconsider sending me a relic. As you know, I work with both Indian and non-Indian people, and there are many occasions for which I could use it" (it being an old custom to "bless" people with a relic, as done in young Jake's case).

Shortly thereafter, I received a box in the mail from Montreal, and it was from Bechard. The box contained a relic of Kateri and a note conveying his best wishes. I was thrilled to receive such a special gift. My excitement was short-lived, however, because the next day, I received word that Bechard had died a few days earlier. Given the dates of his death and my receipt of the box, I realized that his sending me the relic might have been the last thing he ever did. Saddened at his loss, I nonetheless smiled in thinking of Bechard being with Kateri in eternal life.

Painting of Kateri Tekakwitha, by Claude Chauchetière, S.J.
Courtesy of the Archive of the Jesuits in Canada
Another American Indian Saint?

While the above thoughts and memories came to mind when Kateri was canonized, so did the life-story of other Indian "holy-people." The news of Kateri's sanctity received most coverage in 2012, but there is another Indian whose name and holiness are far better known than hers – notably, a "Sioux" (Lakota) elder whose life has significantly influenced many others. For fifty years, the reading public knew him simply as "Black Elk." Unlike Tekakwitha, his association with Christianity (specifically, Catholicism) was not appreciated until the recent past.

Black Elk's Rise from Obscurity to Fame

*Black Elk Speaks* told the story of a wise elder who grew up in the pre- and early reservation era. His recollections were emotionally moving as he portrayed traditional Plains Indian life as far less stressful than the reservation world of his people in the modern era. His popular image was enhanced even more with the publication of *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux.* This work focused solely on the holy-man's relationship to the Sacred, and readers concluded that he was resistant to, and unaffected by, anything non-Indian (especially religion).

These books brought international attention to Black Elk while scholars, popular writers, and Indian spokespersons came to recognize him as Native America's premier philosopher of religion and culture. His popularity produced a current of thought that romanticized traditional Indian religious practices, and that was dismissive of their Christian replacements within Native communities. After all, a holy-man such as Black Elk seemed quite content to remain in the religious universe of the pre-reservation era.

Born into a nineteenth-century Plains Indian world, Black Elk could recall a pastel childhood that turned to moribund gray with the onslaught of settlers west. A participant in his people's defeat of...
Custer at Little Bighorn in 1876, he witnessed the near extinction of his culture’s primary means of subsistence (the bison). Forced to accept confinement on the reservation, he experienced an entire way of life disappear. When the Seventh Cavalry killed nearly two-hundred of his people at Wounded Knee in 1890, the dispirited Black Elk seemed destined to do little but "dream of yesterday." His iconic image was that of a melancholic elder whose memory of religious ritual helped him withstand the assimilating forces of American culture. At least, this is what was conveyed to the many Indian and non-Indian readers of what was called his "life story." He provided spiritual momentum to the Indian revitalization movement of the late twentieth century. Unbeknownst to readers was that Black Elk lived another sixty years after Wounded Knee, and that his life story included far more than anyone knew.

**Resurrection**

When Shakespeare wrote that "the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes,"9 he could hardly imagine that his words would be realized, literally, at the wake of America’s most well-known American Indian religious philosopher. As Black Elk was buried in August 1950, however, his Native community did not mourn the loss of an old-timer associated only with the cavalry-fighting days of their storied past. Instead, his people saw a brightly-lit sky, and gave thanks to "Wakan Tanka" for the saintly soul who had served their communities for half a century – as a Christian evangelist!10 On this occasion, mourners interpreted the bright, night sky as a kind of galactic blessing. It shone upon the casket of an elder whose religious commitment had won for him an eternal reward.11

Receiving a first name at his baptism on the feast of St. Nicholas in 1904, "Nicholas" Black Elk eventually became a religious giant among his people because of his work as a Catholic catechist!12 Once

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9. *Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene II.
10. "Wakan Tanka" is variously translated as "Great Mystery," or "Great Spirit," but colloquially is understood as "God" – an English word that is sometimes avoided and replaced by "Creator."
11. Just as some think that the first miracle for Kateri took place when her face became blemish-free at the time of her death, so do others think that Black Elk’s first miracle was the fulfillment of his prediction that upon his death, a celestial display would affirm his life.
12. My biographies of Black Elk have shown that his commitment to the faith was heartfelt, and that when he died, he still held firm to his Catholic identity. Nonetheless, so entrenched is his "traditionalist" image that some still argue (erroneously) that questions remain regarding his Christian allegiance. My
people became aware of this larger portrait of Black Elk, many wondered if he, like Kateri, should be considered as a candidate for sainthood. Tacit affirmation of this sentiment has even appeared within ecclesiastical literature. "Published with the approval of the Committee on Divine Worship, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops," *Give us This Day: Daily Prayer for Today's Catholic* is a publication that offers (among other things) liturgical readings and profiles of saints for each day of the year. While most days are associated with a saint of tradition, the August 17th date features a description of Black Elk (drawn chiefly from Neihardt's book). Readers unfamiliar with the man's fuller story might wonder if he attained, like Kateri, the status of "Blessed" within the canonization process. His inclusion within the book's section titled "Blessed Among Us" rightly suggests as much.

**Lay Ministry among the Lakota**

*Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (1993) fleshed out Black Elk's life as a catechist. In 2009, his full biography appeared as *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic*. Although not addressed in these books, Black Elk's potential canonization is easy to entertain for Catholic readers. Moreover, in learning what his life and thought entailed, they realize his appeal was not restricted to Indian audiences alone.

Native catechists were the lifeblood of Catholic faith communities among the Lakota. When priests were not available, they would instruct new converts, visit the sick, bury the dead, lead scripture services, preach, and baptize those who were close to death. Provided quarters near the church, they would maintain its property, conduct parish meetings, plan events, and counsel those in need. Prominent in the early decades of the twentieth century, they were lay leaders whose roles would again be needed by the many "priest-less" parishes of the church as a whole in the twenty-first century.

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information was based on his daughter's testimony and that of other trustworthy relatives and friends of his who interacted with him regularly and who knew him well. Testimony to the contrary can be found, but it stems from people who never knew the man, or whose ties were not strong. For example, an American Indian encyclopedia states that he played the role of catechist "to appease his oppressors." Since the encyclopedic entry was written after his daughter's death, she could not directly refute it. The charge prompted his nephew, however, to say that the author "sure didn't know Uncle Nick."

13. As his biographer, I have fielded many inquiries on this point.
15. Both books were published by the University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK.
As a young man, Black Elk was known for being a *heyoka*. Translated as "clown," the *heyoka* role was one that sought to alter people's consciousness. It included sacred obligations, and required one to behave in ways that would make people laugh (e.g., Black Elk would jump in a puddle and pretend he was swimming in a great river). Early literature on the holy-man portrayed him as somewhat of an otherworldly mystic, but his comic persona was just as much a part of his makeup. His people knew him to be a more multi-dimensional person than the sober ascetic of popular writings. They were familiar with a comic behavior that he even employed as a Catholic preacher.

One cold day in church, for example, he wore his wife's overcoat. After finishing his homily, he feigned embarrassment for supposedly just discovering what he unthinkingly had worn. He openly chided his wife for creating this confusion by putting her coat on his hanger—the congregation laughing all the while.

Unplanned humorous incidents also took place in the course of his ministry—his daughter recalling when an old timer presented himself for baptism. When asked what Christian name the elder preferred, "Julia" was the reply. On occasions like this one, "Nick" was a master at bridging the cultures, and smoothing the ground.

He enjoyed conversing with people, and was known for at times speaking at great length. One day, his impatient horse left him at the store and walked home. Knowing of this incident, people were treated to a good laugh when he informed them that he was going to teach that horse a lesson. Some days later, he was again conversing at the same place, but walked home and left the HORSE at the store!
Black Elk's longtime friend, John Lone Goose, testified that once the holy-man was baptized, he committed himself to the gospel for life. He "learned what the Bible meant, and that it was good. Lots of people turned to the Catholic Church through Nick's work" (a missionary estimating that Black Elk was responsible for 400 baptisms). Contrary to what some late twentieth-century commentators have asserted, this was the unequivocal reality of the man's faith-commitment.

Popular literature made him out to be an uncompromising traditionalist, but Lone Goose reported his people's understanding of Black Elk when he said that the holy-man "never talked about the old ways. All he talked about was the Bible and Christ. I was with him most of the time, and I remember what he taught. He taught the name of Christ to Indians who didn't know it. The old people, the young people, the mixed blood, even the white man – everybody who comes to him, he teaches."¹⁶

A nephew of Black Elk's said that even though they lacked formal education, "those old converts . . . could really talk – especially about religion." When Nick preached, "people sat there and just listened to

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him. They could picture what he was talking about." Lone Goose corroborated what the nephew said. He recalled Nick being "a pretty good speaker," and further mused that "I think Our Lord gave him wisdom when he became a Christian. For even though he was kind of blind, his mind was not blind. And when he retired and was sick, he still taught God's word to the people. He turned Christian and took up catechist work. And he was still on it until he died."  

**Black Elk's Wake**

As his health deteriorated and as he sensed life slipping away, the old catechist told family and friends, "I have a feeling that when I die, some sign will be seen. Maybe God will show something. He will be merciful to me and have something shown which will tell of his mercy." Author Joseph Epes Brown said that Black Elk told him, "You will know when I am dying because there will be a great display of some sort in the sky."  

As if on cue, the night of his wake was one that left an indelible memory for everyone present. Stars shimmered and made it seem as if it were day. John Lone Goose said that the sky was "miracle like," and that "God sent those objects to shine on that old missionary . . . the Holy Spirit shined upon him because he was such a holy man."  

Twenty-five years after attending the wake, Jesuit Brother William Siehr spoke of the sky as being a "heavenly display" and "celestial presentation" – the likes of which no one previously had ever seen. Unaware of what Black Elk had told others, Siehr thought the holy-man "had gone to his reward and left some sort of sign to the rest of us." Moved in recalling the experience, the aged Brother said that something of "real significance" had taken place that night. In a reverent tone, he said that "there was something there."  

**New Age and Christianity, Native American Heritage Month, Kateri and Black Elk**

Author Carlos Castaneda became the father of "New Age religion" after writing *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968) – a book that claimed
to report the potions and practices of a Yaqui Indian shaman. Like *Black Elk Speaks*, it garnered a large readership. Besides providing a portrait of Don Juan, Castaneda also inveighed against the Catholic Church for what he evaluated as wholesale mistreatment of Native peoples (who Don Juan represented).

Other authors followed suit, and their writings moved many Indians and non-Indians to lose their affiliation with Christian churches. This trend was especially unfortunate since it was fanned by Castaneda’s many books. Once it came to light that his books were actually fiction purporting to be fact, however, they lost their place within the canon of Native literature. Unfortunately, their popularity lasted long enough to generate a lasting, negative understanding of how pre-reservation Indians responded to Christian teachings.

![Image of Black Elk, daughter Lucy, and wife Anna, circa 1912.](image)

Black Elk, daughter Lucy, and wife Anna, circa 1912.

Courtesy ???

With October's elevation of Tekakwitha to sainthood, her story should receive attention it never previously enjoyed during November's Native American Heritage observances. Black Elk's catechetical ministry should likewise be showcased at this time. Both biographies can counter the anti-Christian trend that has enjoyed popularity within Native North America the past several decades.

Giving Black Elk's ministry its due would gladden the heart of his daughter Lucy. She was for years quite disappointed that his pre-reservation life received so much coverage while his labor for the church had never been reported. This omission needs redress because the premier philosopher of Indian religion maintained a Catholic practice that too many have erroneously thought was antithetical to authentic Indian identity.\(^{23}\)

Black Elk can become an even richer source of reflection now that his entire life has been reported. Given Kateri's canonization, many hope that the holy-man will also be considered. Honored by the church this way, he might inspire still more Indian and non-Indian peoples who seek to experience the Sacred – which he acquired as medicine man, Catholic missionary, and mystic holy-man of the Lakota.

\textit{Identification of Photos:}

\textit{Front Cover:} Painting of Kateri Tekakwitha by Claude Langlois, S.J. Courtesy of the Archive of the Jesuits in Canada.

\textit{Back Cover:}

\textit{Top:} Black Elk seated at church, front row center on right (wearing glasses). Courtesy of Marquette University Catholic Indian Mission Archives.

\textit{Bottom:} Black Elk around the year 1888, as he appeared in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Courtesy of Pete's Buffalo Saloon and Trading Post.

\(^{23}\) Joseph Epes Brown admitted that he avoided referring to Black Elk's Christian identity because he assumed people would think this participation compromised the holy-man's "Indian-ness."